

WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL FARMER – A WIFE?

Integrating Life, Work and Identity: Farm Women and Men Dreaming Different Dreams

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Introduction

This paper draws on two research projects: one (Allan, 2005) investigated how farmers learn for high performance and the other, more recent doctoral research (Allan, 2006), explored the roles and place of farming wives in the enterprises into which they marry. While the workshops will be based on everyday experiences of the participants in both studies and will be user friendly, for the purpose of background some more theoretical knowledge is included here. In the workshops, differences (from these two studies) will be explored between the experiences of women (ie, farm wives, not those who have chosen farming as their own career) and those of farming men. Are farming men and women as couples dreaming different dreams while living parallel lives?

How do farmers learn?

There are two main points that emerge from the men's study: firstly that of a kind of apprenticeship; and secondly, access to knowledge. These points for discussion are summarised as apprenticeship or situated learning, that is, how people learn 'on-the-job' and 'for the job'. While those who have tertiary education have learned skills of 'how to learn' and often have a maturity that allows more ease of access to knowledge and 'other experts', their personal histories still indicate a period of apprenticeship with some form of mentorship.

For apprenticeship learning to be effective it needs supportive progression through a range of positions, although these positions are often more chaotic than orderly. The following section draws on work of many theorists including Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Billett, 2001; Perkins, Jay & Tishman, 1993.

Guided learning: learning with and through others in a social practice

Some critical positions for learning are:

- *The novice or newcomer* requires full access and acceptance to observing everyday practice. They need to be fully immersed both socially and culturally in the practice with transparency, ie, they are getting the 'real oil' not some promotional vision. This period is

supported by social co-participation and commitment by a master, ie, someone not only with experience but also with wisdom.

- *Participating on the periphery*, where over time the newcomer comes to understand the what, why and how of usually more practical aspects of his/her work. This is also strongly supported by someone with in-depth knowledge and wisdom. At this stage the person begins to feel a sense of belonging to the culture or alternatively is likely to feel some alienation and leave the workplace. (Can 'farm wives' easily leave their workplace?)
- *Partial participation*, while still well supported, requires increased responsibilities with empowerment to learn from success and failure. Responses to errors of judgement will either add to the evolving disposition (character, nature and spirit) of the learner or they will likely stop learning. They then cease to identify in that position – eg, as a farmer. If they stay in the position they are likely to disengage psychologically, ie, they withdraw while remaining physically in the job. Constructing a range of dispositions is the key to 'becoming', to 'belonging' and to knowledge. Women often become trapped on the periphery or participating at a lower level, which is debilitating to their dispositional growth and is confidence-sapping.
- *Full membership* is the stage when the person identifies as one with in-depth knowledge. They have maturity, have mastered understanding and have the ability to work things out, but they know and appreciate how to seek help from others more expert. They have social and cultural membership. They are a 'kind of person', eg, a farmer. Mature persons can enter a new career at this stage, bringing knowledge from other experiences and a well developed disposition. Likewise, those not getting due recognition or satisfaction may leave to another context or life choice.
- *Emerging masters* know they can 'make it' if they so desire. They now identify with their position, eg, as a farmer. They have an extensive and in-depth knowledge and they have the disposition required to succeed. They have an extensive range of contacts and social groupings that add to and support their knowledge. They have the choice of staying or leaving. If they leave it will likely be for issues like personal challenge, mental stimulation and seeking enjoyment.

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- *Masters* are recognised as those with knowledge; those who have been successful; those who have experience and yet keep up with new knowledge. They continue to be leaders especially through their wisdom. They continue to challenge their self beliefs and comfort zones, maybe at quite different pursuits.

So what are common critical issues for both farming men and women to succeed in their work life?

While concepts identified in both studies are pertinent to their particular perspectives, many general needs are pinpointed. Those most critical contribute to the person's knowledge, personal attributes and sense of self as an individual. Some points are:

- Choice is an intrinsic part of success. Not merely perceived choice, but a freedom of choice, where the situation can be changed for one's self without dominant outside pressures
- Farming men and women each need to have adventure in their lives. This requires being proactive and innovative. They need to take risks and be fully involved in valid decision making which is energising
- One's intellectual curiosity needs to be sustained. This requires genuine interest and having a dream – your dream not someone else's. One can see possibilities for one's self, not a series of problems. Self beliefs are challenged
- There is anticipation in life, not a feeling of entrapment
- One is mentally stimulated, seeking out other like-minded people for social learning, yet researching actively as an individual
- One doesn't accept the status quo simply as historical and local knowledge, or as cultural expectations, but is self-directed and self-driven
- One is self-aware, self-challenging and a rigorous thinker. Continually reflects on one's position, needs of self and debating personal challenges
- One feels a sense of satisfaction, eagerness for one's position and for future possibilities.

Learning to think and thinking to learn

These largely dispositional skills or knowledge underpin rigorous thinking. Subsequent actions, then, lead to a resilience and resourcefulness that is essential for expertise. There is, though, a clear progression of knowledge, not entrapment. While the higher performing farmers exhibited these largely dispositional factors to a high level, most were not strongly evident in the lower performing men. These farmers were often still farming to the prescription and strategies of their fathers or other historical mentors. Social learning seems critical and, for the men and women participants alike, a wide range of contacts both with peers and with experts, are major indicators of transformative learning and of success. There needs to be a fluidity of knowledge construction from theoretical knowledge to practice and vice versa, ie, learning on the job converting to 'head' knowledge or knowing through reflecting on practice. They know

or understand where theoretical knowledge fits with practice. *The critical points of development, though, are those dispositional qualities (above) which enable the use of knowledge.*

So, how does this fit with the women's study?

Integrating life-work, work-life and fragmented selves

In the earlier investigation (Allan, 2005), women farm-partners were identified as being very resourceful and powerful assets to their farming practices and farming lives, as well as the communities in which they farm. Yet many (Allan, 2006) reach the point where they feel superfluous to the operation. They feel that they are "wasting (their) time" or "not achieving" for their self. They feel a void and lack fulfillment.

In comparison, those men who had limited initial choice of career through family pressures accepted their position, even when they reached a stage where there were other options. Typically, it seems often only financial difficulties force them to reluctantly leave their farm. This suggests some sense of self-worth and self-satisfaction in their situation, possibly coupled with uncertainty of change and an inability to make the decisions required. As a farmer they have a certain status. The women though seem to lack status and are more commonly making choices as a result of lack of satisfaction, personal distress, a sense of worthlessness and feeling of being unvalued. They often describe their different modes of coping in ways that might be characterised as submissiveness and one of servant hood. While most women agree that they have, initially at least, 'loved' being immersed in farm-life and work it seems this level of contentedness is limited.

While some women negotiate an acceptable position within their farming practices, many express a need to have more. As one woman put it, "we need and yes I'll use that word, 'need' to use our intelligence, need mental stimulation, not just helping and supporting". In search of this need, some go to work outside the farming business to forge their own identity, thus changing the dynamics of their farm-life; some leave the marriage and the farm in seeking new possibilities; while yet others accept their 'lot' as 'just the way it is' and 'make the most of' their situation. In effect, these latter women may resign themselves to a dissatisfied life, often

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with extensive periods of unhappiness and depression, a common theme running through these women's stories.

So, 'lets be positive' do I hear you say?

Is it more positive to bury issues or to expose them? Is it positive to concentrate on one person's dream to the detriment of the other, or to use only half the talents available within a couple/enterprise?

Farm women are intrinsic to the success and sustainability of the family farm and arguably, farming as we know it. Amongst other things they also produce the next generation but this research (Allan, 2006) questions the personal sustainability of farm women (wives). The most negative issue to come to light has been the fact that these issues have not been talked about over the years, even though the evidence shows that this is not a new 'problem' or new reality. These stories have been common throughout the research and yet because they were buried or kept quiet, the women then felt very isolated. They think "it's only me", "everyone else seems to be happy" and the men think it's "only my wife – why can't I keep her happy", or "why doesn't she pull herself together". Children leaving home may force the issue but it has often been an issue for 10 to 15 years or more. The younger generation of farm women are stronger negotiators. They won't succumb to expectations as the previous generation did. They are openly prepared to 'rock the boat'. There is, though, a distinct lack of intergenerational support among women. Often the 'matriarchs' (who are a product of the historically male-dominated domain), feel threatened by the new generation (or sometimes their peers) who will not live the life expected. This then may threaten their self-worth and often the very survival of a heritage which they have worked for so hard, often to their own personal detriment and lack of wellness.

The fact that so many farm women have commonly expressed a lack of personal sense of fulfillment with a huge void in their lives is not simply a personal problem. It is a social and cultural problem which requires social and cultural change.

So how can there be life and 'life on the farm'? How do we change cultural expectations?

The issues are complex, and the needs and solutions individual, but one thing is clear – women's needs must be prioritised. Ways need to be found to enable these needs, interests and careers to be met. If it is not a good economic decision then maybe it is a good decision for other reasons. Any solutions will need to be creative and sometimes the decision not to farm will be the right one. Cultures change when people think about issues, have conversations together and repeat these conversations to others. Society is continually changing and for any culture to survive it must change with its people. Issues need to come out of the closet.

Such change can occur but it means being prepared to brave the new and to challenge the status quo; to be prepared to 'rock the boat'. What this recent exposure has done is to give both farming women and men permission to have much needed conversations and to negotiate other possibilities - a challenging but essential 'road to hoe' if the family farm is to remain an icon of New Zealand life.

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